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ABSTRACT

Derived from a study by Whitebook and others (1982), this ERIC Short Report presents findings, recommendations, and other information on staff burnout in child care settings. Child care staff were found to be underpaid and overworked. Differences in working conditions among centers and job satisfaction among staff appeared to be related to such factors as job title distinctions, funding sources, and length of program day. According to Whitebook and colleagues, tackling burnout by reassessing such factors as a center's resources, staffing, programming, and scheduling can both improve work conditions and enable staff to see the conditions leading to burnout as being "outside of their own personal inadequacies." Related ERIC documents and additional references are listed. (RH)

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ERIC/EECE Short Report-4

ED327296

Staff 'Burnout' in Child Care Settings

THE QUALITY OF CARE children receive in child care centers is often threatened by "burnout" – the phenomenon defined as a loss of energy and interest in one's job.

This assertion is made by Marcy Whitebook, Carollee Howes, Rory Darrah, and Jane Friedman in a report of their recent study of staff burnout in child care centers, "Caring for the Caregivers: Staff Burnout in Child Care." Portions of the report are summarized here.*

Contending that burnout is often responsible for the high turnover of staff in child care centers, Whitebook and colleagues state that continual staff changes "limit efforts to build consistent, creative, and responsive environments for children and their families."

Further, tense, overworked adults will probably have difficulty providing high quality care for children. Consequently, identification of those conditions which lead to burnout in child care centers is important.

Study Findings

Using survey research methods, Whitebook and colleagues interviewed 95 staff members from 32 San Francisco child care centers, representing one-fifth of the city's centers.

The interviews elicited information on such topics as staff training, wages, job responsibilities, job-related benefits, frequency of staff turnover, and changes staff would like in their centers. Center budget information and funding information were obtained from center administrators.

Among the findings were the following:

- *Wages and Benefits*: Center staff were found to be in the lower 10% of adult wage earners, even though 70% of them had a bachelor's or higher degree. Staff also received few benefits (such as medical and dental coverage, job "enrichment" days, and paid sick time). Half of the sample, for example, received no medical coverage. Of those who did, two-thirds received only partial coverage. Privately funded center staff were paid the lowest salaries and were the least likely to receive benefits.

- *Hours Worked and Breaks Available*: Seventy-two percent of staff in the sample reported working extra unpaid hours each week on curriculum planning, parent contact, center maintenance, and occasional fundraising. Many staff also contributed extra time by not taking breaks even though by California law, workers are entitled to a paid break for every 4 hours of work. More than one-third of the sample did not receive such breaks or could not take them because staff numbers were inadequate to cover on breaks.

- *Job Turnover*: Staff tended to switch centers often. While 54% of the total group had been in the field of early child care for 5 or more years, only 17% had been in one center that long. Turnover rates were lowest for staff in part-time programs which paid more and had lower adult-child ratios.

- *Decision-making*: Administrative staff had the most say on hiring and firing, budgets, and center enrollments. Teachers tended to have the most involvement in day-to-day decisions, including grouping of children, determining appropriate discipline, and communicating with parents. Although teachers and teacher-aides spent equal time with the children, 70% of teachers as compared to 37% of teacher-aides were involved in day-to-day decisions.

Staff offered various reasons for discontent with this often hierarchical arrangement of decision-making. For example, many of those left out of major decision-making felt that decisions were made on the basis of lack of information and without regard to the consequences for others of that decision. Aides expressed discontent because their opinions regarding day-to-day decisions were often disregarded even though they saw themselves as having parity with other staff in child care responsibility.

- *Sources of Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction*: Contrary to assertions made by other researchers that intense work with children contributes to burnout, 78% of the sample reported that the direct work with the children was what engaged and pleased them the most about their work. Other sources of job satisfaction included the opportunity to learn and develop personal skills while working, and the fact that no two days on the job were seen as being alike.

Among the sources of dissatisfaction expressed were the long hours, low pay, lack of benefits and job security, and poor center maintenance.

In general, child care staff were found to be underpaid and overworked; differences in working conditions among centers and job satisfaction among staff appeared to be related to such factors as job title distinctions, funding sources, and length of program day.

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*The full text of this report will be available in Spring 1982 in *Current Topics* in Early Childhood Education, Vol. IV, Lilian Katz (Ed.), Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp., 355 Chestnut Street, Norwood, NJ 07648. An earlier form of this report is available from ERIC under the title, "Who's Minding the Child Care Workers? A Look at Staff Burnout" (ED 188, 764, 27 p. 1980).

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Recommendations for Improvement

In order to ameliorate those conditions leading to burnout, Whitebook and colleagues suggest, among other things, that staff involvement in decision-making be increased, job title distinctions be examined, and break and substitute policies be improved.

Helpful as such changes may be, the most obvious resource needed, according to the authors, is more money in order to upgrade salaries and center facilities. Following a discussion of possible sources of additional funds for child care centers, the authors argue that a major stumbling block to acquiring such funds is the commonly held assumption in society that child care is work requiring few skills. As long as child care work is considered unskilled, its low pay and status will reflect this viewpoint.

The authors contend that "although already overworked," child care staff must work to change these attitudes. This requires such efforts as informing legislators and policy-makers of work conditions, pressuring organizations which represent child care staff, developing media outreach programs to inform people about child care work, creating new organizations for staff which enable them to support each other and share ideas about common problems such as contracts, grievances, health coverage, and unionizing.

Causes of Burnout Reassessed

According to Whitebook and colleagues, tackling burnout by reassessing such factors as a center's resources, staffing, programming, and scheduling can both improve work conditions and enable staff to see the conditions leading to burnout as being "outside of their own personal inadequacies."

Once staff perceive external factors as being in part responsible for burnout, the authors contend that staff may be better able "to address the larger tasks of legitimating child care work and publicizing the needs of child care workers." Such efforts, they conclude, "may result in child care acquiring the social support and financial resources needed to avoid the working conditions which ultimately result in burnout."

RELATED ERIC DOCUMENTS

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